DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 408 EC 307 149

AUTHOR	Sharpe, Michael N.
TITLE	Disproportionate Representation of Minorities in Special Education: A Focus Group Study of Professional Educator Perspectives. Final Report Phase I: Professional Groups.
INSTITUTION	Minnesota State Dept. of Children, Families and Learning, St. Paul. Office of Special Education.
PUB DATE	1996-06-00
NOTE	38p.; For related documents, see EC 307 150-151.
AVAILABLE FROM	Division of Special Education, Minnesota Dept. of Children, Families & Learning, 550 Cedar Street, St. Paul, MN 55101; Web site: http://www.cfl.state.mn.us
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	American Indians; Blacks; Cultural Differences; *Disabilities; Disability Identification; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; Family School Relationship; Focus Groups; Hispanic Americans; Minority Group Teachers; *Minority Groups; Racial Factors; Regular and Special Education Relationship; *Special Education; Student Evaluation; *Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS	African Americans; *Disproportionate Representation (Spec Educ); Latinos; *Minnesota

ABSTRACT

This document is the report of one phase of a Minnesota study to examine the problem of misrepresentation and overrepresentation of African American, American Indian, and Latino students in special education. This phase of the study involved eight professional focus groups who examined four broad areas: factors contributing to minority misrepresentation; current material and human resources available; promising solutions to minority misrepresentation; and development of an action plan. The groups were designed to represent all three minority cultural groups as well as various geographic locations in the state, rural and urban areas, and various professional roles in the disability area. Focus groups addressed questions concerning what works, what doesn't work, what the contributing factors are, and what needs to be done. All focus groups emphasized the need to promote cultural awareness and sensitivity among education personnel. An action plan was developed with five objectives: (1) to promote awareness of cultural and social dynamics that affect school achievement; (2) to develop and implement effective home and school communication links with minority families; (3) to promote practices which increase the availability of minority staff at all levels of the educational system; (4) to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of regular and special education in the provision of services to minority students; and (5) to develop and implement assessment models and identification which meet the needs of minority students. An annotated bibliography is attached. Contains 28 references. (DB)

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ED 429 408

Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group
Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning
Division of Special Education

Final Report

Phase I: Professional Groups

Disproportionate Representation of Minorities in Special Education: A Focus Group Study of Professional Educator Perspectives

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Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning

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Final Report

Phase I: Professional Groups

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Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group

■ Vision

An appropriate public education for each student.

■ Mission

We promote appropriate representation of students of color in special education through:

a) *clarification of issues*

b) *collaboration with education agencies, organizations, programs, and families*

c) *identifying best practices in non-biased assessment*

d) *dissemination of information*

e) *staff development*

■ 1996-97 Work Plan

This work plan is based upon the findings and recommendations contained in this report.

New Initiatives

- Conduct focus groups with parents of students of color with disabilities
- Prepare guidelines and staff development for monitors
- Develop assessment guidelines and training resources for non-LEP students of color
- Identify resources for teacher training programs

Ongoing Initiatives

- Prepare translations of special education due process materials
- Audiotape parent rights information in Hmong, Spanish, and English
- Conduct staff development for Indian and Bilingual Home-School Liaisons
- Conduct inservice training on appropriate assessment of limited English proficient students
- Assist with parent involvement pilot projects with communities of color

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Final Report

Focus Group Analysis: Professional Groups

Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group

Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning
Division of Special Education

Introduction

According to a review of the research conducted by Gollnick and Chin (1990), the child population throughout the 1990's will be on the rise after remaining nearly level for about the last decade. Specifically, persons under the age of 18 will increase from 64 million in 1990 to 67 million by the turn of the century. Much of this population growth will be witnessed in youth from the least well off demographic groups. For example, African American and Latino youth who currently constitute about 27% of the present child population will represent nearly 33% of the child population in the year 2010. According to data gathered by the Quality Education for Minorities Project (1990), over 30% of the students in public schools were from minority groups. During that same period, approximately 4.5 million children with disabilities received special education services, of which an estimated 1.4 million represented members of minority groups (U.S. Department of Education, 1990). Suggesting that growing numbers of minority youth are likely to be at risk for placement in special education programs in the future, Gollnick and Chin (1990) argue for the development of multicultural curriculum for all educators as a means of promoting cultural awareness and building a positive school climate.

Even conceding that those considered at risk will increase in the school population at a rapid pace, recently published historical evidence suggests that minority youth are likely to be misrepresented in special education programs (Lara, 1994). While the reasons for such placements are attributed to a wide

range of assessment and identification practices and cultural barriers (Luft, 1995), the trend is clearly moving toward the increasing utilization of the special education system as a primary vehicle for the delivery of remedial and compensatory education for minority students. Some states have sought to reduce or minimize inappropriate placements of minority students, but Lara (1994) suggests that "few have developed mechanisms for addressing the overrepresentation issue once a district is suspected of having some disproportionality."

The issue of overidentification has not gone unnoticed by researchers who have studied federal policies related to funding special education programs in the United States. Suggesting that when funding mechanisms for the delivery of special education services are population-based rather than counted on a per pupil basis, the problem is often one of *underidentification*, and consequently, underservice. However, the problem now for many states is quite the opposite, with researchers concluding that within special education populations, "the much higher identification rates for minority and male students also raise important questions about identification procedures" (Parrish & Verstegen, 1994).

Like many other states in the nation, Minnesota has also experienced an increase in the numbers of minority students eligible for special education services. According to data maintained by the Minnesota Civil Rights Information System (MNCRIS), overrepresentation of African American, Latino, and American Indian students appears to be a growing concern, particularly in the less visible areas of learning disabilities, emotional and behavior disorders, and mild mental disabilities. Also, if trends of other state and national initiatives to raise educational standards can be used to forecast potential problems, it appears that these numbers could be expected to increase as a result of Minnesota's newly adopted Graduation Standards. That is, as schools seek to reconcile problems of underachievement among disadvantaged populations and require incrementally higher standards of academic achievement, it has been speculated that one possible outcome will be to utilize special education as a means of addressing discrepancies in educational performance. Given the current concentration of minorities within the metropolitan area, reliance on special education systems to meet the demands of high academic standards could potentially result in even

more substantial numbers of minority students referred for services. In contrast, Asian students are found to be statistically underrepresented in special education programs in Minnesota. The significance of this fact will be addressed in the future.

To help seek solutions to the problem of misrepresentation and overrepresentation of African American, American Indian, and Latino students, the Minority and Cultural Issues work group of the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning designed and implemented a focus group study to examine this problem from perspective of education professionals who serve each of those communities. Specifically, the stated purpose for conducting these groups revolved around four broad areas:

1) Factors contributing to minority misrepresentation

2) Current material and human resources available

3) Promising solutions to minority misrepresentation

4) Mission and an outline for an action plan

This report represents an analysis of the focus group data obtained on behalf of the efforts of the Minority and Cultural Issues work group. While the overall goal of the report is to accurately analyze and synthesize a voluminous amount of purposeful dialogue which transpired as a result of focus group sessions, it will also serve a dual role as a device to outline a plan of action. But rather than simply constructing a list of activities that address global objectives, the action plan is intended to reflect the database generated by the focus groups, where key issues and overarching themes were identified and transformed into "need areas" in which specific, research-based strategies are outlined.

It is intended that this report will serve as a starting point from which more in-depth discussions will ensue. Recommendations about specific actions can then be changed or modified to suit the needs of those who are eventually charged with the design and implementation of activities aimed at solutions to the problems associated with misrepresentation. To that end, this report is designed to be used for policy-actionable purposes and should be reviewed in this manner. And while it ulti-

mately focuses on solutions, it is likely that new priorities and concerns will emerge as further insights are gained as a result of subsequent planning and development activities.

Procedure

To conduct this study, members of the Minority and Cultural Issues work group developed a plan that included a purpose statement, a description of proposed groups and composition, and a series of interview questions. As indicated earlier, the purpose was to obtain information about factors contributing to misrepresentation as well as to identify resources and practices which could serve as solutions to the problem. Also, it was intended that the information obtained from this effort would be used to develop a course of action that would be implemented in the future. To accomplish these objectives, eight focus groups were conducted, based on cultural group and location within Minnesota. These characteristics can be seen in Table 1.

Membership for each focus group was established through the development of guidelines which stipulated that each group shall have no less than 5, and no more than 10, members in order to achieve optimal results. Also, it was stated that the general composition of each group represented the *best effort* in meeting the following criteria: minority culture representation, dominant culture representation, gender balance, geographic location (e.g., urban, rural, reservation), professional role diversity, and participants licensed and assigned to work in a dis-

Table 1: Focus Group Characteristics

Cultural Group	Number	Location
African American	1	East Metro
African American	1	West Metro
African American	1	Duluth
American Indian	1	Northern Minnesota (Duluth/Cloquet)
American Indian	1	Southern Minnesota (Red Wing, Pipestone)
American Indian	1	Metropolitan
Latino	1	Metropolitan
Latino	1	Western Minnesota (Moorhead/Willmar)

ability area. A description of the professional roles and the organizations that were sources for identifying members is presented in Table 2.

Once participants were recruited and assembled in their respective groups, they were presented with an introductory statement by the facilitator, followed by a presentation of the MNCRIS statistical summaries compiled to report on the status of minority populations within the realm of the special education system. Upon reviewing this information, focus group participants were asked to reflect on four primary questions about the subject of minority overrepresentation within special education. In brief, focus groups were asked to respond to the following questions:

1) What works?

2) What does not work?

3) What are contributing factors?

4) What needs to be done?

Essentially, the first two questions dealt with issues directly related to the

Table 2: Focus Group Member Characteristics

Professional Role	Sources of Group Members
▪ School Social Worker	▪ Urban League
▪ School Psychologist	▪ Multi-Cultural Task Force
▪ Speech Pathologist	▪ Parent Forum
▪ Learning Disabilities Teacher	▪ Special Education Advisory Council
▪ Teacher of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders	▪ Four Winds School
▪ Higher Education	▪ Parent Advocacy Center for Education Rights
▪ Division of Special Education Consultant	▪ Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health
▪ Classroom Teacher	▪ Learning Disabilities Association
▪ Director of Special Education	▪ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
▪ Special Education Coordinator	
▪ Principal	▪ Minnesota Administrators of Special Education

MNCRIS data shown to the group, while the latter two questions were intended to address issues related to the findings of studies conducted earlier by the former Minnesota Department of Education. These findings involved: (1) the relationship existing between race and special education placement, and (2) factors which influenced identification and placement practices in special education. Responses of focus group members were recorded by audio tape, supplemented by field notes prepared by group facilitators.

Once all of the focus groups were conducted, a preliminary report was developed based on the field notes along with an initial analysis of the audio tapes. In the development of this report, responses of each group were reviewed to identify common issues or concerns in which there appeared to be some degree of similarity in content. These issues were then grouped and assigned a general descriptor (e.g., assessment practices) to facilitate the process of identifying key issues or "themes." Thus, the descriptor "Assessment Practices" could represent such statements as "We need to make assessments more experiential," or "Some kinds of assessment seem disrespectful." The primary objective of this activity was to synthesize and narrow the scope of the many types of statements made by focus group members. A Summary of Key Issues section can be found at end of this report. This summary includes an overview of key areas, concerns, and issues based on the responses of cultural focus groups to each of the four primary questions.

Once descriptors for key issues were developed, they were placed on a grid as a way of portraying the range of issues and concerns for each question posed to the groups. This grid is depicted in Table 3 and is intended to provide a general overview of key issues identified by the groups. It also served as a starting point in helping to ascertain what, if any, unique themes could be observed in a separate analysis of the groups or if commonalities could be identified in a combined analysis of the groups. It should be noted that the term "unique" is used somewhat advisedly since thematic content is not considered mutually exclusive; that is, themes will overlap among the groups, and it is likely that no one theme will be associated with just one group.

Once this information had been reviewed by members of the Minority and Cultural Issues work group, another iteration of the focus group analysis was con-

Table 1: Descriptors of Key Issues

	What Works?	What Doesn't Work?	What are Contributing Factors?	What Needs to be Done?
African American	■ Team approach to decision-making ■ Family involvement, parent participation ■ Student focused/small group instruction	■ Regular education role ■ Referral and placement ■ Setting standards and norms	■ Poverty ■ Attitudes and racism ■ Cultural awareness and values	■ Staff development and training ■ Improve preservice preparation ■ Regular education role ■ Early intervention ■ Role models and minority staff representation
	What Works?	**What Doesn't Work?**	**What are Contributing Factors?**	**What Needs to be Done?**
American Indian	■ Family involvement, parent participation ■ Home-school liaison/advocates ■ Due process, rights and protections	■ Assessment practices ■ Eligibility criteria & categorization	■ Poverty ■ Assessment practices ■ Attitudes and racism ■ Family stressors ■ Cultural awareness and values	■ Preservice preparation ■ Staff development and training ■ Improve assessment practices ■ Home-school liaisons
	What Works?	**What Doesn't Work?**	**What are Contributing Factors?**	**What Needs to be Done?**
Latino	■ Team approach to decision-making ■ Family involvement, parent participation ■ Home-school liaisons/advocates ■ Limited English Proficient (LEP) staff, bilingual evaluators	■ Regular education role ■ Dual language responsibilities of student ■ Eligibility criteria & categorization	■ Assessment practices ■ Referral and placement ■ Language barriers	■ Staff development and training ■ Instructional/ teaching practices ■ English as Second Language (ESL) and bilingual staff

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ducted by an extensive tape-based analysis similar to the process described by Krueger (1994). First, all tapes were listened to and an abridged transcription of the focus group content was entered on a computer. Second, these data were analyzed question by question to determine how well the themes which emerged from this level of analysis correlated with the initial, or preliminary findings. Using information from the tape-based analysis, it was then possible to extract specific comments from focus group members which supported thematic areas between and within the groups. As such, it served as a database which could be used to provide readers with important contextual information about complex and multi-faceted issues (e.g., "assessment"). Finally, these data were also used as a means of synthesizing information in order to identify major areas of "need" and the framework for a plan of action.

Focus Group Summaries

African American

The development of family-focused early intervention initiatives, collaborative and cooperative education strategies, and staff development efforts to increase cultural awareness appeared to be the primary themes which prompted the articulation of several key issues by African American focus groups. Early intervention initiatives were identified at various points in group discussions, suggesting the models which promoted both the active involvement of families in the education process and helped to establish an early relationship of trust between educators and family members who may be wary of or intimidated by the educational system. In addition, an early intervention model was also seen as a viable means of providing African American youth with an opportunity to gain important academic skills at earlier age levels. Several comments from focus group members seemed to suggest that at least some of the misrepresentation of African American youth in special education programs could be attributed to a lack of early intervention initiatives at the preschool and elementary grade levels which contained a specific focus on parent involvement. In responding to these issues, comments by focus group members included:

"Intervention is not early enough..."

"You have to wonder how a 5 year-old cannot be salvageable.."

"...the other part of labeling is that early childhood programs don't label—they look how to meet the child's needs."

"I taught for 15 years and I think we have to talk about parent involvement...have to individualize the involvement of Black parents."

Perspectives about collaboration and cooperation issues included observations suggesting that increased cooperation was needed with agencies outside the school. However, comments alluding to shared responsibility to provide appropriate services were not only directed at interagency initiatives, but were often elaborated upon to convey the need to define the respective roles of special and regular education as well. This theme reflects many of the comments by focus group members that the needs of African American youth either cannot or should not be met by special education alone, and that many of the problems currently faced by African American youth are often a manifestation of the lack of capacity on behalf of regular education to meet the needs of minority youth. Comments about collaboration and special-regular education roles included:

"We need more collaboration with other agencies, because collaboration is a team kind of thing."

"...there has to be more of a cooperative team collaborative...(we) have to work with social service...they do comprehensive planning in hospitals, why can't we do the same?"

"I don't think it is a problem of special education—it is regular education and how we wind up with that number of learning disabled students."

"There is a lot that works in special education...special education can lead regular education."

"Seems to me we are trying to solve the problems of what should be happening in regular education on a day to day basis...we forget why we started it (special education programs) twenty years ago."

"This is my point—this is not about special education...when we don't know what to do, we call them special ed. students."

Based on many of the comments of African American focus groups, many of the problems associated with misrepresentation can be attributed to a lack of awareness and preparation by teachers to recognize the impacting forces of poverty and environmental circumstances and how these issues are reflected in the learning styles and educational needs of African American youth. Most often cited by focus group members was the "lack of knowledge of cultural differences," or statements that it was necessary for educators to "go back to cultural differ-

ences" to gain a better understanding of the underlying dynamics contributing to the challenges in education currently experienced by many African American youth. In one focus group session, the role of language was discussed as an example of a cultural difference that sometimes served to limit the educational opportunities for youth. In some cases, focus group members discussed the role of higher education and the responsibility it had in educating teachers in preservice programs. Comments about cultural differences and the need for both staff development efforts and teacher preparation programs to address issues of this nature included:

> *"Some teachers have no experience being around people of color. Our school is different than any in the city and the teacher in front of a classroom knows that everything has to be done differently."*
>
> *"Speech and language—these are culturally bound...some other major factors are going on in these three (MNCRIS) categories other than disabilities."*
>
> *"Kids have to learn a language in early education...(these) kids can be bright, but are still looked at as special education."*
>
> *"Teachers are insecure about diversity, and children pick up on that, especially from the far reaching suburbs. Those fears really play a part."*
>
> *"I can tell you right now that there is not one school in the state (that practices) cultural competence as opposed to "nice" diversity training."*

The African American focus groups also stressed the importance of being represented in the educational system and serving as role models for youth, particularly as it pertained to increasing the numbers of minority staff in the public school system who could relate to the needs of minority youth.

> *"(We need) role models, more minority staff."*
>
> *"We need (African American) persons, not just "a" person."*
>
> *"I worked in a school where the issue was brought up, "We have too many white teachers. Then we got Black teachers, then they were the first to be fired or laid off."*

The implication that the educational experiences of African American youth might be different in an environment which includes a greater representation of African American persons appears to be consistent with a recent study by Serwatka, Deering, and Grant (1995) who found that the proportion of overrepresentation of African American students in programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders decreased as the percentage of the population of African Ameri-

cans increased. In an earlier study, but one which concentrated on examining the relationship of underrepresentation of African American youth in gifted programs, Serwatka, Deering, and Stoddard (1989) revealed that the single best predictor of the rate of representation was the proportion of the population in the school district that was comprised of African Americans.

American Indian

A cultural awareness theme is clearly evident in focus groups which represented American Indians, often in the context of such key issues as assessment practices, labeling, and categorization. More than any other group, professionals who participated in this group see American Indians as representing a distinct and unique culture in which values and lifestyles are not always mutually compatible with traditional systems of education. Based on the responses of focus group members, this conflict often results in misplacement of American Indian youth into special education programs, particularly those aimed at serving students with less visible disabilities (learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, mild mental impairments). Much of the discussion centered around the appropriateness of the assessments currently being used, particularly with regard to their perceived lack of cultural sensitivity. Observations by focus group members included:

"One thing I hear from is the area of assessment and the interpretation of that data, that is strange to us, we don't fully understand it...there should be some sort of pairing with Indian people to help us understand what they are assessing...the human factor."

"Maybe one of the things we should think about is put together a group to help understand the (purpose of) assessment, make it experiential instead of voodoo, I think kids are afraid."

"As far as the testing, we are questioning if we are using the right tools...combine it with the oral tradition we have talked about."

"In the Indian culture, we are very inclusive, we are always trying to make a family...in special education you separate, you take away from the mainstream, it's two different perspectives."

"It (the assessment process) seems so disrespectful. You have to observe what is in the home."

"We have this idea that everybody is going to be an angel, if they are not, they get sorted...I get very concerned with all this sorting...special education is very subjective. I think (traditional) assessment is a sham, it doesn't mean anything."

Another theme which emerged from this group revolved around family support and early intervention issues, including advocacy or liaison services for youth and families. With regard to this discussion, focus group members supported the efforts of American Indian home-school liaisons who had knowledge and understanding of the school environment and the cultural context of the youth's family and social system. In this role, home-school liaisons were seen as a resource person who could help facilitate an increased understanding of the role of cultural values in the education of American Indian youth. Comments relating to the expansion of support systems promoting communication and early intervention with families include:

"Home school liaisons...good ones help facilitate or advocate for the needs of students."

"Important for staff to realize the role of the home school liaison...they help to translate needs."

"There has to be a way of working with the Native American family so they know the system really, really well."

"I use oral tradition and history...we get parents involved in the education as much as we can by having persons serve as liaisons."

"...before the classroom there is the family, I think every Indian family has had stress put on them...I don't think it works to cast stones or put up barriers, we have to look at how we need to strengthen homes."

Staff development and training initiatives was also a central theme of focus groups representing the American Indian community. These initiatives covered a wide range of key issues, but were primarily focused on promoting the cultural awareness of teachers, assessment and placement practices, attainment of education outcomes, and recognition of historical events and the range of social stressors that impact contemporary American Indian families. Focus group member comments included:

"...have more sensitive teachers...(they) don't want to talk about what happened in history...anybody knows even if they deny it, the problem is still there."

"We need to change our philosophies to look at what their (American Indian children) natural abilities are, not how we can pick them apart."

"There is a lack of education, lack of understanding about our culture—that's what we have to address. If we have nonnative teachers teaching our kids, they should know who we are, our values, our customs."

"Staff don't know what they are looking for...(should) develop some best practices and I think we can do it. The question is: What does it mean for the teacher if that child is from a different culture, what are we going to do? We have to find some other alternatives for supporting minority cultures."

"Poverty causes a lot of problems that are almost invisible problems."

Many of the comments of those involved in American Indian focus groups echoed the concerns expressed in a report issued by the National Advisory Council on Indian Education (National Indian Education Association, 1990). These concerns included the failure of the educational system to address differences in learning styles and the importance of integrating American Indian culture into the curriculum.

Latino

Language and mobility issues were major themes of particular interest to Latino focus groups. Based on the responses of these groups, there is a strong consensus that many of the problems encountered by Latino children are directly linked to the issue of having to acquire two languages to:

1) meet the demands of language requirements in school, and

2) maintain communication with family members who speak Spanish.

Based on the comments from several focus group members, language barriers are seen as the source of many problems related to key issues involving assessment and identification of learning problems, labeling, and categorization issues which contribute to misrepresentation of Latino students in special education programs. Employing assessment practices where "evaluators speak the same language" and using a "non-categorical approach" was endorsed by several focus group members as a way to reduce inappropriate placements due to language differences. References to English as a Second Language (ESL) were also very frequent, particularly related to concerns about the current availability of resources to meet the needs of minority youth. Comments related to language issues included:

"One or two parents speak very colloquial Spanish, but parents don't often read Spanish...kids are thrown into English and often become better in English, even though they don't speak it very well."

"Kids have lots of problems struggling academically...ESL is their only form of support."

"Children learn English, but the parent is still speaking Spanish."

"More funding for ESL and bilingual education."

"Need more dollars for ESL where we have 70 kids for one teacher...need more enrichment."

"Minnesota is not providing bilingual support at preschool and early elementary...not creating the bridges from Spanish to English."

"Bilingual and ESL staff working together using a team approach for referrals."

"Tests not normed appropriately, will discriminate and lead to overrepresentation."

In addition to language, the transient nature of some Latino populations in Minnesota and cultural values inconsistent with traditional education delivery systems also emerged as an important theme. In addition to comments about the various academic problems encountered as a result of being a member of a family of migrant workers, focus group members also suggested that maintaining current and accurate records and special education information histories for Latino youth was a problem, especially for secondary level students. Focus group members also observed that the movement of families had a negative impact on the transition of Latino youth from elementary to the secondary level. Comments of this nature included:

"Families are spending time in Minnesota, but still very mobile...(they) go back to Texas in the winter and the kids miss school."

"Really hard to get parents to stop moving, to come to meetings".

"Bulk of kids come from small border towns, (their families) are very poor, (have) poor job skills and education level."

"Transition of students and transferring records at the secondary level does not go smoothly."

"...loss of student records during transition to secondary."

"Secondary program does not work as well as elementary."

"No support at the secondary level."

Recommended strategies to overcome some of the problems associated with special education services for Latino youth include staff development initiatives focused on resolving "responsibility" issues between regular and special educa-

tion, and increasing awareness among both teachers and students to promote a better understanding of the challenges faced by Latino students. There was much support from focus group members to increase home-school liaison services, Limited English Proficient (LEP) staff and bilingual personnel who are capable of conducting culturally appropriate assessments. Suggesting that the increased availability of LEP and related staff could help to alleviate the language barriers that result in misrepresentation in special education, service providers in this focus group offered the following comments:

> *"Increased support services, training of all staff about what can be done outside of special education, and be proactive in supporting kids outside of special education so they aren't referred."*
>
> *"Teachers still have biases when they discuss social issues...students are clumped together by race and don't often interact positively."*
>
> *"Information is not filtering down to all teachers in the district."*
>
> *"Training on how to approach instruction and skill development."*
>
> *"...an LEP assessment team...having a time and a schedule to support good assessments."*
>
> *"Bilingual and ESL staff working together using a team approach."*
>
> *"Mandatory training for teachers and building principals."*
>
> *"Information gathered at home often influences assessment plan and eligibility decisions."*
>
> *"Prereferral and referral is the responsibility of regular education, but special education is still involved...helps if they spend some time with the teacher before referral."*

The concerns about the area of assessment expressed by members of Latino focus groups is evident in the research literature as well. For example, Figueroa (1991) proposed that psychometric measures (i.e., intelligence tests) not be used in educational decision-making for students from bilingual populations. Similarly, Chinn (1980) has called for the application of assessment practices which may be addressed through (1) "culture-free" tests, (2) culture-fair tests, (3) development of culture-specific tests, (4) modification of existing tests with new norms and test samples, and (5) differential weighting of verbal and nonverbal portions of intelligence and achievement tests. By doing so, she suggests that assessment practices would be more sensitive to the needs of a culturally diverse student population and would help to reduce the number of minority youth referred for special education services.

Combined Group Summary

Based on an overall analysis of the key issues identified by African American, American Indian, and Latino focus groups, a number of consistent themes emerged among the groups. Above all others, the need to promote cultural awareness and sensitivity among education personnel was seen as paramount by all groups. This theme was repeated in many different ways, but always served as the basic foundation for assertions and concerns expressed regarding problems associated with misidentification and overrepresentation of minority youth in special education.

As suggested by one focus group member, the educational system needs to go beyond diversity training and instead seek to achieve cultural competence within the schools by promoting culturally sensitive "best practices." What was clearly implied by many focus group members was that cultural awareness was central to understanding the underlying dynamics driving referral, assessment, eligibility, and placement practices in special education programs. Oftentimes, these practices are seen as culturally inappropriate and insensitive, or simply as misguided efforts on behalf of special education delivery systems to compensate for regular education systems which have not met the needs of minority youth.

Many focus group members felt that those currently working in the educational system had little or very little knowledge about those aspects of culture and environment impacting the daily experiences of minority youth and families. Perhaps as a result of this awareness, all focus groups suggested a that lack of communication between the home and school was a significant problem, something that manifested itself in low levels of family involvement in their child's education program, irrespective of whether involvement was related to the regular or the special education setting.

Not only was it suggested that this lack of communication came from a lack of knowledge and cultural sensitivity, at least some of the problem appeared to be directly attributed to the lack of minority professionals currently working in the schools. While each focus group could identify different reasons for increasing the availability of minority staff in the schools (e.g., role models for African American groups, home-school liaisons for American Indian groups, and

language-fair specialists for Latino groups) they seemed unified in suggesting that to do so would lead to building trusting relationships with students and families and would also serve as a means of legitimizing and enhancing the credibility of the educational system.

Due in part to issues identified earlier, there was considerable agreement among all focus groups that regular education offered few educational alternatives to minority students. Moreover, many focus group members appeared to suggest that the regular education system had no clearly defined role in serving the needs of minority students, or that it seemingly had chosen to abdicate its responsibilities altogether. As a result, the special education system was often seen as the only recourse for providing needed services to students. Interestingly, none of the groups chose to "blame" the special education system and indeed, recommended many aspects of it that should be adapted and applied in the regular education setting (e.g., early intervention, parent involvement in planning). As one focus group member suggested, "To me, the question is not how many kids do we have in special education, but how we can make school successful for all learners." And while group members could identify a number of things that "worked" with special education programs, some tools used to drive assessment and placement issues were called into question. The primary concern among focus groups, however, was whether special education services were being provided in a manner that truly met the educational needs of students or if they were the only option from a limited array of instructional services.

The cultural appropriateness of assessment instruments received a great deal of discussion, as well as issues and concerns of labeling and categorization. Simply put, there appeared to be much agreement that traditional assessment models and practices have not generally met the needs of minority youth and that alternative approaches need to be considered in the future. Moreover, many focus group members stated the need to outline "best practices" with regard to assessment strategies and techniques so that they were used by education professionals to identify disabilities in a way that considers the cultural context of students.

Based on the common areas of concern reflected by these themes, it seems worthwhile to "operationalize" them in order to provide a clear description of the priority needs indicated by the groups. These needs will then be used as the basis for the development of an "action plan" outlined in the following section. These common areas of concern, expressed as "needs," are presented below:

Need Area 1: To promote awareness of cultural and social dynamics that impact school achievement.

Need Area 2: To develop and implement effective home and school communication links with minority families.

Need Area 3: To promote practices and procedures which increase the availability of minority staff at all levels of the educational system.

Need Area 4: To clearly define the roles and responsibilities of regular and special education in the provision of services to minority students.

Need Area 5: To develop and implement assessment models and instructional practices which meet the needs of minority students.

Action Plan Outline

To address each of the needs identified through a combined analysis of focus group results, a number of actions will be proposed. Some will be very specific and based on current research findings, and some will be broader in scope, reflecting long-range capacity-building initiatives. These activities and strategies will be outlined in a stepwise format in order to clearly delineate the scope and sequence in which an initiative of this nature might be implemented. Therefore, rather than being considered as a proposed plan, it is best viewed as an operational outline whose merits can be discussed and debated as a starting point for the development of the actual plan that will eventually be adopted for implementation. Also, an annotated bibliography is attached to this report to provide readers with recent research findings that support the central themes identified by the focus groups and which also provide ideas about interventions and other actions that may be considered to address issues of concern.

Action Plan Specifications

The Department of Children, Families & Learning (CFL) should engage in efforts to establish a statewide advisory committee to oversee the development and implementation of a long-range strategic plan focused on addressing the needs

identified in this report, along with other issues related to the misrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. Perhaps modeled after similar types of advisory committees (e.g., Special Education Advisory Committee), this group would be charged with the development of a mission which needs to be accomplished in order to achieve a state special education system with clear and specific guidelines for the referral, assessment, and placement of minority students in special education programs. Among the activities that might be considered by this group include:

- Site visits around the U.S. to observe exemplary programs which either present alternatives to meeting the learning needs of minority students, or whose programs demonstrate culturally sensitive methods in special educational service delivery systems.
- Invitations to authorities and recognized leaders in the field of minority special education (i.e., assessment, alternative education) to conduct seminars and large group presentations, or provide technical assistance to the development and implementation of objectives pertinent to the overall mission.
- Development and dissemination of reports and summaries to state officials (e.g., Department of Children, Families & Learning, Minnesota Legislature) about practices and procedures (referral, assessment, staff development activities) which can be adopted in rules or articulated as recommended practices to local education agencies.

To accomplish the objectives articulated by the advisory committee, a series of plenary work groups could be formed to address specific issues deemed essential by the advisory committee. Each work group would consist of 5-8 members, representing a wide range of agencies and interests, depending on the issue to be addressed. For example, a work group could be comprised of educators, related services personnel, university faculty, community leaders, students, or family members. With facilitation provided by members of the Minority and Cultural Issues work group, plenary groups would convene on a periodic basis to study needs and develop recommendations for plans of action to the advisory committee. Transforming the five needs identified in this report into objectives is an example of a general framework that could be used. Plenary work group activities might include the following:

■ Objective 1

Promote awareness of cultural and social dynamics that impact school achievement.

Development of strategies for in-service and pre-service training that is aimed at helping teachers and other professionals gain a better understanding of the norms and unique characteristics of persons who represent different cultural groups. Although no one set of characteristics can be attributed to any member of *any* group, researchers (Cloud & Landurand, 1988; Johnson and Ramirez, 1987; Taylor, 1989) have developed some useful guidelines which need to be considered in communicating with individuals of differing cultural backgrounds. For example, according to Cloud & Landurand, (1988), "rules for touching others vary from culture to culture. They provide similar examples for "sharing space," "eye contact," and "time ordering of interaction." They have developed a multicultural training program which helps educators to use cultural information to make inferences about special education needs. The unique learning styles of minority youth (Ramirez and Castaneda, 1974) can also be reviewed by a plenary work group as another example of the many resources available to promote cultural awareness and the implications it has for addressing the needs of minority youth and their families.

■ Objective 2

Develop and implement effective home and school communication links with minority families.

Various researchers (Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Marion, 1982) have offered suggestions about improving communication with minority families. For example, to facilitate communication with families who speak a language other than English, these researchers offer some straightforward guidelines which can be used by all types of educators:

1) Send messages home in the parent's native language.

2) Use an appropriate reading level.

3) "Listen" to the messages being returned.

According to Johnson & Ramirez (1987) "courtesy, sincerity, and ample opportunity and time to convey concerns can promote communication and participation by parents from different cultural backgrounds." They also recommend that educators should "support parents as they learn how to participate in the system," by adopting the role of advocate and encouraging parental participation at home. Data from focus groups indicate that home and school links are often improved by the availability of a home-school liaison who is also a member of the same minority group and is familiar with the cultural context of both school and family systems. The task of the work group assigned to address this objective might be to examine ways these and similar strategies can be applied to increase communication and family involvement in order to recommend "best practice" guidelines which can be used by educators and other professional staff. Also, these guidelines can be disseminated to preservice programs throughout Minnesota so they can be used in the training of future educators.

- **Objective 3**

  Promote practices which increase the availability of minority staff at all levels of the educational system.

  Many focus group members noted that the availability of minority staff has not kept pace with the rapidly changing demographics in the metropolitan school system. As a result, the relative disproportion of minority to non-minority staff has been a source of concern not only from the standpoint of establishing role models for youth, but also from the perspective of achieving what one focus group member referred to as "cultural competence." A plenary group assigned to this objective might study and recommend strategies ensuring that the interests of minority youth and families are fully represented on planning teams. As one focus group member suggested, minority representation in program planning must extend beyond the level of commitment as indicated by such comments as "We have a Black para [paraprofessional] that comes to the meetings." Also, this work group might collaborate with other state agencies to study strategies that will promote the identification, recruitment, and retention of minorities within the educational community.

- **Objective 4**

Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of regular and special education in the provision of services to minority students.

Even with the increasing emphasis on such strategies as the use of regular education prereferral interventions and inclusive educational practices in the past decade, the role of special education is still often seen as the only option for students who struggle with academics or who exhibit what have been termed as "hard to teach" behaviors. This theme was clearly conveyed by focus group members along with the attendant problem of having to label minority youth in order for them to receive assistance. While this objective is complex and to some degree contingent upon the outcomes of other objectives involved in this operational framework, the work group that assumes responsibility for this issue can engage in an ongoing process to help identify equally effective instructional alternatives other than special education. One objective might be to develop a process (e.g., needs assessment) schools can use to determine the range of alternatives which currently exist in order to identify options that might meet the educational needs of minority youth.

■ Objective 5

Develop and implement assessment models and identification practices which meet the needs of minority students.

As has been suggested by a number of researchers (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Swedo, 1987) and observed by several members of the various focus groups, it is not uncommon for educators to continuously administer assessments to children until a learning or behavioral disability is found. Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls (1987) state that "what is required to reverse the so-called legitimizing function of assessment can be termed an advocacy orientation." Using language differences as an example, they recommend a more thoughtful approach to determining and applying eligibility criteria to students from minority groups by focusing on:

1) the extent to which children's language and culture are incorporated into the school program;

2) the extent to which children are encouraged to use both their first and second languages actively in the classroom to amplify their experiences in interacting with other children and adults; and

3) the extent to which educators collaborate with parents in a shared enterprise.

A work group can help to elaborate points such as these by reviewing current assessment procedures and policies in order to make "best practices" recommendations for teachers and related personnel. Based on comments by focus group members, direct, functional assessment, performance-based measures and controlled learning trials are techniques which might be used more consistently as an alternative to current approaches.

The action plan which includes these five objectives is not offered as a definitive, "quick fix" to a problem that is by nature difficult and complex, nor does it intend to delineate the full range of actions that will ultimately be needed to achieve a satisfactory resolution to the issue of misrepresentation of minority youth within special education programs. It does, however, represent a plan which clearly moves beyond "admiring the problem" by articulating a framework that is focused on action-oriented strategies and results. As such, it is an important first step that should be taken to ensure that all minority students are afforded with quality programs that effectively meet their educational needs, but do so in a manner that demonstrates cultural competence.

Summary of Key Issues

The following information represents a summary listing of key areas, concerns, and issues expressed by focus groups in response to the following questions: (1) What works in special education? (2) What does not work? (3) What factors contribute to misrepresentation? (4) What are some solutions? The list is organized according to the responses of each cultural focus group.

African American

What works?

- Team process and IEP plan
- Communication with family
- Student focus, student involvement
- Family involvement

What does not work?

- Early intervention...not early enough
- Need regular education involvement
- Not special education problem...regular education problem
- Standards of education—teacher expectations
- Not recognize cultural issues...self esteem issues
- The referral process, labeling students

What factors contribute to misrepresentation?

- Poverty, environment
- Attitude, misconceptions, racism
- IEP and planning deficiencies
- Racism, knowledge, tolerance, attitudes, misconceptions
- Lack of collaborative efforts

What are solutions?

- Better trained teachers, more training
- Graduate better prepared teachers
- Regular education involvement
- Early intervention
- Role models, more minority staff

American Indian

What works?

- Involvement of parents and special education staff
- Due process
- Rights and protections
- Early Childhood Special Education
- Home-school liaisons
- Indian advocates
- Minority intervention teams
- Direct functional assessments
- Holistic—Whole child approach

What does not work?

- Parents want to keep kids out of special education because the cultural norm of community is violated when singling out an individual
- Assessment
- Some assessments seem disrespectful
- Validity of assessment instruments
- High caseloads in special education programs
- High percent of students labeled as disabled
- Stigmatizing special education labels

What factors contribute to misrepresentation?

- Assessment practices
- Socioeconomic status/poverty
- Different cultural values
- American Indian children better at special problem-solving than verbal fluency
- Lack of teacher training
- Teacher expectations
- Insensitive teachers
- Values are different
- Family stressors
- Intergenerational stress
- Need to strengthen homes
- Racism
- Written !anguage problems

What are solutions?

- Higher education responsibility for preservice training
- A revamped education that is more responsive to minorities
- More home-school liaisons

- Curriculum that is culturally appropriate
- Empowerment of American Indian communities
- Building communication and support in American Indian communities
- More training for teachers and administrators
- Resolving assessment and identification issues
- Better interpretation of instruments
- Early intervention...family contacts

Latino Group Summary

What works?

- Team decisions
- Parent involvement
- Home-school liaisons
- Limited English Proficient (LEP) staff, bilingual staff evaluators

What does not work?

- Children learn English but parents speak Spanish
- Labeling and identification
- Secondary more of problem than elementary
- Responsibility issues between regular and special education

What factors contribute to misrepresentation?

- Invalid assessment models
- Overidentification of Latino students
- Vague special education criteria

What are solutions?

- Training for staff
- Increase teacher expectation
- Preservice and in-service training
- Lower student-teacher ratio
- Instructional/teaching approaches such as Project Read and whole language
- Implement Project Read
- Noncategorical approach
- More staff for fair language assessments

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Annotated Bibliography

Addressing Minority Overrepresentation in Special Education: Cultural Barriers to Effective Collaboration.

Pamela Luft (1995). Paper presented at the Annual International Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (73rd, Indianapolis, IN, April 5-9, 1995).

This paper examines the cultural differences that arise because of disability, ethnicity, and social status and their impact on assessment practices, programming, goal setting, and the special education processes established by legislation, especially in light of the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. Suggestions for resolving existing cultural barriers include encouraging parent groups to become involved and providing professionals with culturally competent information and suggested practices. The paper considers the conceptual discrepancies and cultural barriers that exist between minority families and the special education system. Overrepresentation of minorities in special education is discussed in terms of historical patterns, assessment procedures, and legal suits and legislation. A section on definitions and stratifications considers minority classifications, disability categories, and class and status categories. Parental rights in special education as documented by court litigation and legislation are reviewed. Existing cultural differences are identified through consideration of typically American cultural values, contrasting values of identity, contrasting views of disability, and contrasting views of relationships. Implications of cultural differences for parental involvement in the schools are discussed. Specific recommendations to increase parental involvement are offered.

Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education: A Continuing Debate

Alfredo J. Artiles and Stanley C. Trent (1994). Journal-of-Special-Education; v27 n4 p410-37 Win 1994 Special Issue: Theory and Practice of Special Education: Taking Stock a Quarter Century after Deno and Dunn.

This article reviews historically the overrepresentation of Latino and African American students in special education; examines the influence of court cases, debate about systemic issues, demographic and socioeconomic changes, the construction of minority students' school failure, and the fallacy of the cultural diversity-disability analogy; and offers solutions.

The Effects of Placement Litigation on Psychological and Education Classification

Daniel J. Reschly (1991). Diagnostique; v17 n1 p6-20 Fall 1991

This article reviews the evolution of placement litigation based on the overrepresentation of minority students in special educational programs for students with mild disabilities, provides commentaries on four court trials that have yielded judicial opinion and discusses the implications of this litigation for the reform of special education services.

State Data Collection and Monitoring Procedures Regarding Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education. Project FORUM.

Julia Lara (1994). Report presented to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Alexandria, VA.

This report presents results of a study describing current state policies and practices to minimize or reduce inappropriate placements of minority students in special education. States were surveyed to obtain information about changes in their procedures for collecting data by race/ethnicity and their procedures to monitor local districts where overrepresentation is identified. The analysis is built on a 1991 study by the staff of the Arkansas Department of Education. Findings are discussed and illustrated in tabular form. Administrative practices are described for six states that have developed formal follow-up procedures subsequent to a finding of overrepresentation in a local district. These states are Arkansas, California, Illinois, Massachusetts,

New Mexico, and Pennsylvania. The analysis concludes that, although there has been an increase in the number of states that collect child count data by race/ethnicity, few states have mechanisms for addressing the overrepresentation issue once a district is suspected of having some disproportionality. Three recommendations are offered to address this issue: (1) data should be collected by all states by gender, race, and ethnicity; (2) further analysis of state enrollment data is needed to get a more accurate picture of the state dimensions of this problem; and (3) collaboration should continue among government, experts, and stakeholders to support the development of solutions to this problem.

Bilingualism and Psychometrics

R. A. Figueroa (1991). Diagnostique; v17 n1 p70-85 Fall 1991

This article reviews literature asserting that legal mandates eliminating overrepresentation in special education classes may have hurt minority children and argues that such a position ignores the impact of bilingualism on psychometric test performance. The article proposes that psychometric tests be excluded from any aspect of decision making with bilingual populations.

Educational Needs of Minorities with Disabilities

Frederick Bedell (1992). In Wright, Tennyson J., Ed.; Leung, Paul, Ed. The Unique Needs of Minorities with Disabilities: Setting an Agenda for the Future. Conference Proceedings (Jackson, Mississippi, May 6-7).

This paper by a public school teacher and elected official with 32 years experience in public education discusses the placement of minority students and service delivery to minorities in special education programs in public school systems. The paper argues that various school practices often cause a disproportionate placement of minorities in special education programs and that a number of societal factors make the problems of at-risk minority students even more difficult and unpredictable. In addition, the demographic revolution of the past decade has brought about a degree of linguistic and cultural diversity that profoundly influences the country's social institutions. Schools are ill-equipped to deal with language minority students because of inadequate teacher training or inappropriate curricula, and, as a consequence, those students are placed in special education programming, as are many minority youngsters at-risk for other reasons, such as low self-esteem, peer pressure, inappropriate curricula, negative home environment, and, in some cases, a hostile school climate. It is proposed, however, that general education programs properly adapted can serve a large number of students currently placed in special education programs. Recommendations are made to prevent the overrepresentation of minorities in special programs and to improve the placement process of children with special needs, and systems to assure adequate service delivery for this population is presented. A reaction paper by Tennyson J. Wright adds to these recommendations, noting that educators need to be educated about the real America of minority populations; that Americans need to develop an appreciation of differences as human and natural; and that a liberal education of inclusion relative to racial, cultural, gender, disability, class, and language differences needs to be developed. A second reaction paper, by Julian Castillo, points out that an understanding of the sub-groups encompassed in the term Latino is needed, that programs need to address the issue of accountability, and that effective preschool programs and individual service planning are needed for minority group students.

Exploring Education Issues of Cultural Diversity.

Federal Regional Resource Center (1991). A report by the Federal Regional Resource Center.

For a project designed to increase understanding of cultural diversity in the United States as a preliminary to meeting the educational needs of all the country's children, 42 professionals and parents were asked to identify the critical issues in the education of children from minority backgrounds. Over 200 issues were identified in 8 areas: (1) administration and policy; (2) attitudes and bias; (3) training and personnel; (4) curriculum and instruction; (5) assessment; (6) society and community; (7) parents and families; and (8) funding. Selected issues raised by respondents indicated that, among other problems: (1) school organization is not effective in dealing with diversity; (2) the current educational system has a mainstream bias which adversely affects minority students; (3) educators are not receiving appropriate training in this area and teacher educators also lack the needed knowledge and skills; (4) current instruction, curricula, materials/methods and service delivery models are inadequate; (5) inadequate assessment has led to overrepresentation or underrepresentation of minority students in various educational programs; (6) increased collaboration within the community is needed; (7) parental involvement needs to be encouraged and increased; and (8) funding for all schools should be equalized. All the issues identified are listed in the report under the eight categories. Concluding

sections offer additional thoughts, a description of the data collection process, a directory of the respondents, and a listing of respondents by the ethnic groups with which they are concerned.

Policy Implications of Differential Status among Latino Subgroups

Emily Arcia and James J. Gallagher (1994). The Transdisciplinary Journal; v4 n2 p65-73 Jun 1994

The issue of overrepresentation of minority groups in special education is discussed. The example of Mexican American and Puerto Rican children is used to illustrate that overrepresentation is justified and desirable if the relative need of the children in the groups differs in developmental and functional status. Policy implications are discussed.

Academic Performance

Department of Education (1990). INAR/NACIE Joint Issues Sessions, National Indian Education Association (NIEA) Annual Conference (22nd, San Diego, California, October 15, 1990).

This report summarizes two joint sessions held by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education to hear testimony on issues related to the academic performance of Native American students. Educators, employers, parents, and tribal officials testified on the following topics: Native students' high dropout rates and lack of basic skills; low teacher expectations of Native students; high Native unemployment rates; lack of teacher accountability in both public and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools; the failure of the educational system to address differences in learning styles; high Native failure rates on the New Mexico high school competency test, resulting in ineligibility for a diploma or state job; test bias; alternative student evaluation strategies; the overrepresentation of Native students in special education; labeling and self-fulfilling prophesies; positive expectations and recognizing success; parent participation; the question of college preparation versus vocational education; recruitment of Native students to college; and the importance of integrating Native culture into the curriculum. A principal described his own research and findings on hemispheric specialization and cognitive style among Indian and other minority students. Promising educational strategies are described, involving integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, application of special education methods, training of teacher aides, and extracurricular activities as a motivator.

Delivering Special Education: Statistics and Trends. Revised—ERIC Digest #E463.

Council for Exceptional Children (1991), ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, Reston, Va.

This digest presents summary statistics addressing the following questions: (1) "How are children with disabilities defined?" (2) "Who are the students served?" (3) "Where are these students receiving their special education?" and (4) "How many teachers are needed?" The digest also examines past and present trends and their implications for the future of special education. Trends identified include: a possible future decrease in special education students as prereferral interventions serve "hard to teach" students; a continuing decrease in the number of students identified as mentally retarded (possibly due to more restrictive standards, a corresponding increased number of students identified as learning disabled, and avoidance of overrepresentation of minority students as mentally retarded); a possible increase in the number of children served due to prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol; and increased numbers of very young children served as a result of federal mandates.